Strawberry Shortcake and the Winter That Would Not End

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Winter was a happy time in Strawberryland. The Strawberry Kids loved to watch big fluffy snowflakes fall on the berry patches. They often played in the snow, making angel shapes, sledding, and skating.

The Strawberry Kids invited each other to their cozy houses. At teatime, they ate freshly baked tarts and sat by the fire.

But one winter in Strawberryland was not as happy as most. It was long. Too long. Strawberry Shortcake began to worry about her strawberry plants. "They have been sleeping under the snow for months," she said. "Now they need sun." But where was spring? Something was wrong.

One cold, gray morning, the Kids met at Strawberry's house for breakfast. They stared out the window and shivered. Snow was falling heavily.

"I looked in my pantry this morning and counted my jars of jam," said Strawberry. "I'm running very low."

"I calculate," said Plum Puddin', a smart, studious young fellow, "that if spring doesn't come soon, we won't have a big berry crop this year."

"But we must have lots of berries," said Blueberry Muffin shyly, twisting the pocket of her apron with her fingers. "Otherwise, what will we eat? What will we sell at market?"

"If I don't get some sun again soon," said pretty little Raspberry Tart, "I'll lose all the pink in my cheeks."

Huckleberry Pie only yawned. He never worried about anything. But when he looked at the thermometer outside Strawberry's window, he frowned. The temperature was still very low.

Blueberry Muffin also went to the window. She looked up and was surprised to see their friend Elderberry Owl flying at great speed toward the house.

The kids rushed to the door to greet Elderberry as he whooshed out of the snowy sky and landed in a flurry on the doorstep.

"Oh dear!" panted the owl. "Something awful has happened!" He shook the snow off his wings and his bushy eyebrows. "It's really too awful," he continued.

"What's the matter, Elderberry?" asked the Strawberry Kids.

"I have to get my breath first," said the owl, still panting.

The Strawberry Kids knew that Elderberry had important news. But they also knew that he wouldn't say anything until he was ready.

"I need a big cup of hot tea," said the owl as he stepped into the house. After three slices of well-buttered blueberry bread and two cups of mint tea, he felt better. He cleared his throat.

"Someone has stolen the Snow King's magic Snow Crystal!" he said. "He can't stop the snow without it."

"That's why it's still winter!" said Plum Puddin'.

"It was stolen about a month ago," said Elderberry. "The Snow King didn't want anyone to know. He knew how frightened we would be."

"Who could have stolen it?" asked Strawberry.

"Whoo? Who indeed?" said the owl, opening his round eyes. "I'll tell you what happened."

The Kids snuggled down in their comfortable chairs around the fire to listen to the owl's story.

"Many days ago," said Elderberry, "I was flying over the field next to the Deep Dark Wood."

The Strawberry Kids shuddered. The Deep Dark Wood was a frightening place. Even in summer, they didn't go there.

"Suddenly," Elderberry continued, "I saw an animal running for his life into the woods. He was carrying something as he ran. Every once in a while he looked over his shoulder. I think the animal I saw had just stolen the Snow Crystal."

"But who was it?" asked Huckleberry Pie.

"Whoo?" said the owl. "It was Benedict Badger."

"Ohhh!" said the Kids.

"I knew it!" said Raspberry Tart. "That mean old badger is always the one to make trouble! When the birds

sing in the summer, he throws nuts at them. He chases all the animals away from his part of the woods."

"We aren't sure that Benedict was the thief," said Blueberry Muffin. Blueberry was always willing to give someone the benefit of the doubt.

"I think Raspberry is right," said Elderberry. "Just for a second or two, I saw what Benedict was carrying. It was something so shiny that the light hurt my eyes. It must have been the Snow Crystal. He took it into the Deep Dark Wood and disappeared down a tunnel."

"Elderberry, do you think you could find that tunnel again?" asked Strawberry Shortcake.

"Who, me?" said the owl. "Of course. It was just to the left of the biggest elm tree in the Dark Wood, between two large rocks."

"Well, then," said Strawberry, "it's time for the Strawberry Kids to visit old Benedict."

"No, no!" said Blueberry, hiding her face in her apron. "He's mean. He'll eat us up!"

"No, he won't," said Strawberry. "We'll be clever and careful. We must find out if Benedict has the Snow Crystal."

The Kids knew that Strawberry was right, but they were still afraid.

"I've heard," said Plum Puddin', "that if you go into Benedict's burrow, he can make tree roots twist all around you."

"Just like this!" said Huckleberry Pie. He jumped up and grabbed Raspberry.

Raspberry screamed.

"Stop that, Huckleberry," said Strawberry. "Benedict Badger doesn't have magic powers. But he might have the Snow Crystal. And we have to go find it right away."

"I think we should eat more jam and take a nap before we go," said Huckleberry, dropping back into his chair.

Strawberry paid no attention to him. "Blueberry," she said, "you must pack something for us to eat. Ask everyone to donate some food for the trip. Plum Puddin', please talk to Elderberry and make a map for us. We have to be sure we know the way to Benedict's."

Blueberry picked up the baby, Apple Dumplin', who had been sleeping by the fire. "You can ride on the sled, Dumplin'," she said. "We'll wrap you up warmly."

"What can I do?" asked Raspberry Tart.

"Find some rope and bring the lantern," said Strawberry. "They will be important."

Huckleberry Pie was dozing by the fire.

"Wake up, Huckleberry!" said Strawberry Shortcake. "You must help me make helmets and swords."

"Are we going to fight Benedict?" asked Huckleberry sleepily.

"I don't know," said Strawberry. "But we have to be ready for anything."

The Kids went to do their chores. Elderberry and Plum Puddin' stayed by the fire to work out a map. Blueberry put Apple Dumplin' between them and went to get a supply of acorn tops.

"These will be our helmets," Strawberry told Huckleberry.

Huckleberry used a sharp stick to poke two holes in each acorn top. Then he ran a string through the holes so the Kids could tie on their helmets.

Strawberry made the swords. They were only sticks tied together, but Strawberry thought they would make the Kids feel braver.

Soon all the Kids were back at Strawberry's house and ready to go. They were dressed in their warmest clothes. A large bag of food and the helmets and swords were loaded on the sled. Apple Dumplin' sat on top. Then Raspberry Tart tied a rope around everyone's waist so they wouldn't lose each other in the snow.

"Follow me," said Elderberry Owl, flapping his wings and taking off into the sky.

"Let's go!" said Strawberry, bracing herself against the wind.

The owl flew just ahead of the Kids. The little band below him trudged through the deep snow, up over drifts, down into gullies, under snowy bushes, and around big trees. The wind blew hard and the snow kept falling.

They came to a deep snowbank. Strawberry and Plum Puddin' pushed hard to get the sled up the hill. Apple Dumplin' held on tightly. Then Huckleberry crawled over the top of the snowbank. Suddenly he felt a sharp tug at his waist. Raspberry Tart had lost her footing!

The Kids pulled hard on the rope. Finally they dragged Raspberry up to the top of the snowbank. Poor Raspberry. She was covered with snow and looked like a winter ghost. The Kids quickly brushed the snow off her face and clothes. Strawberry rubbed Raspberry's hands to warm them. When Raspberry felt better, the Kids signaled Elderberry Owl to lead on through the falling snow.

They were crossing an open field when Elderberry fluttered down to tell them that they were at the edge of the Deep Dark Wood. In front of them, they saw a tangle of black branches and whirling snow. "He's right," said Plum Puddin', checking his map. "This is it."

"Come, friends," called the owl. "Follow me."

The Kids took a deep breath and started into the dreaded woods. There seemed to be holes and hollows everywhere, places to fall into, stumps and vines to trip over. The Kids were cold and scared.

They walked and walked. Soon it became clear that Elderberry couldn't find Benedict's tunnel. Plum Puddin' checked his map, but none of the trees and hills seemed to be where they should have been. Every tree stump and hollow looked alike.

"Just a little farther," the owl called down. "I know we're close."

The Kids came to a dry place under a stony ledge and decided to stop and rest. But Elderberry Owl wouldn't rest. He fluttered from branch to branch, studying the trees and rocks. Plum Puddin' was busy too. He stared at the stumps and rechecked his map.

"I've got it!" he shouted suddenly. "I found the tunnel!" The Kids ran over to look. There was a dark hole between two large rocks. Everyone knew it had to be Benedict Badger's tunnel.

"I was about to suggest this very spot," said Elderberry.

"You and Plum Puddin' are both very clever," said Strawberry. "Before we go down there, we have to put on our armor."

"A helmet will crush my curls," said Raspberry Tart

with a frown. But she tied a helmet on her head like the others and tucked a sword under her arm.

They decided to leave the sled just outside the tunnel. Blueberry offered to carry Apple Dumplin'. Huckleberry Pie stuck some jam sandwiches in his pocket in case he got hungry. Then everyone said good-bye to Elderberry Owl.

"I'm sorry I can't go with you," he said. "But owls don't go into underground tunnels. I'll be waiting right here."

Plum Puddin' led the way. The black hole in front of the Kids went down as far as they could see. The walls of the tunnel were studded with jagged rocks and sharp roots. The Kids skidded and slid down and down.

"I don't want to go any farther," said Raspberry. She looked pale and scared in the dim light.

"We have to," said Strawberry Shortcake. "And we must be quiet," she added in a whisper. "Benedict will probably be sleeping. Badgers often do that in winter. We don't want to wake him."

The path went deeper into the earth. Strawberry's lantern threw strange, enormous shadows on the tunnel walls.

Suddenly part of a tree root caught Raspberry's curls.

"Help!" she cried. "He's got me! The badger's got me!"

"It's only a root," said Huckleberry. "Don't be silly."

"Ssshhhh!" whispered Strawberry. "Don't make any noise. There's his door."

They crept forward silently. Holding his breath, Huckleberry quietly pushed the door open.

The old badger was slumped in a rickety wooden chair, sound asleep. Leaves and sticks were scattered everywhere. A small fire glowed feebly in the damp and moldy room.

"He's big!" whispered Blueberry, clutching Apple Dumplin' to her.

"He does look mean," said Plum Puddin', "even when he's sleeping."

"But what about the Snow Crystal?" whispered Raspberry. "Do you see it?"

"I do, I do!" said Strawberry. "There it is, on the table."

Strawberry was right. The shining Snow Crystal was standing on a small table at the badger's elbow. Hard and cold as ice, the Crystal glowed blue in the pale light.

"Stay here," whispered Strawberry. "I'll try to get the Crystal without waking him."

She tiptoed into the room. Leaves and twigs cracked under her feet. But the badger continued to snore. Strawberry reached the table and picked up the Snow Crystal. When it was safe in her arms, she turned away.

Suddenly she tripped on a stick and fell. The Kids gasped and rushed to help her. Benedict Badger opened one eye. He knew at once what was happening.

"Stop, thief!" he cried, rising from his creaky chair.

He lunged for the door of the burrow and pushed it shut. The Kids scattered left and right, reaching for their swords. The angry badger lumbered toward Strawberry and the Crystal. "Give it to me!" he shouted. Strawberry pointed her sword at Benedict to hold him off and threw the Crystal to Huckleberry Pie. Then the badger lunged at Huckleberry, who tossed the Crystal to Raspberry Tart. "Stop, you thieving Kids!" cried the furious badger. He whirled toward Raspberry, who threw the Crystal to Blueberry Muffin. Blueberry threw it to Plum Puddin'. And so it went, on and on.

Benedict Badger turned right and left, round and round. Then he began to pant and wheeze. Finally he fell back in his chair exhausted.

"Come on!" said Strawberry to the Kids. They ran for the door of the burrow. Plum Puddin' held on to the Crystal as he ran.

Suddenly the Kids heard loud sobbing sounds behind them. They stopped and looked back at Benedict. He was crying, his head buried in his paws. "What will I do?" he cried. "What will I do?"

The Kids looked at each other in surprise. The mean old badger was crying like a baby. Strawberry walked a few steps toward him. "Why are you crying?" she asked.

Benedict continued to sob. Strawberry went closer and patted his paw gently. "Don't cry," she said.

Benedict wept even harder. Strawberry stroked his fur until he was calm.

Finally Benedict shook off Strawberry's hand. "Never mind, never mind," he said gruffly. "You came for the Snow Crystal. Now just take it and go away!"

"All right," said Strawberry. "But before we go, would you tell us why you took the Snow Crystal in the first place?"

"So that winter would last all year," said Benedict, sniffling again.

"But why? Winter is fun for a while, but after a few months everyone wants warm, sunny weather."

"I don't," said Benedict. "In winter, I can sleep all day and not hear birds chirping or animals scurrying back and forth over my burrow."

"But those are nice sounds," said Strawberry.

"Not to me," said Benedict, shaking his furry head. "I am old and I have no friends. The only thing that makes me happy is sleeping."

"But what about us, Benedict Badger?" said Raspberry. "If it snowed all year, we couldn't grow our berries. Then we would have nothing to eat. We would have no jams!"

"What do I care about jams?" said Benedict.

"Taste this!" said Huckleberry, shoving his jam sandwich into the badger's mouth.

Benedict looked very surprised. He took a bite.

"Delicious!" he said finally, smacking his lips. "Do you have more?"

"Yes, we do," said Strawberry. "We can give you lots of good things to eat, but first we have to return the magic Crystal to the Snow King."

"But that means you will go away," said Benedict.

"No, it doesn't," said Plum Puddin'. "Everyone can wait here with you while I take the Crystal to Elderberry Owl, who is waiting outside. He can fly it back to the Snow King. Then I will bring the food from the sled."

"Please hurry," said Benedict. "I'm hungry."

Benedict put more wood on the fire to warm up his new friends. Plum Puddin' raced up the tunnel to find Elderberry Owl. He gave the Crystal to the owl. Then he took the bag of food down the tunnel.

Elderberry wasted no time. He flapped his big wings and flew off to the north as fast as he could go.

The Kids had a fine party in Benedict's burrow. It was warm and cozy, and they ate muffins and tarts and bread and jam. The Kids told stories and jokes and made old Benedict laugh. Finally the Kids had to go home.

Benedict guided them up the dark tunnel that had seemed so frightening just a short time before. When they got outside, the sun was shining and the snow was beginning to melt off the branches of the trees.

"Hurray for Elderberry," said Blueberry happily. "He returned the Snow Crystal."

"Spring will soon be here," said Strawberry, clapping her hands.

"I don't want you to leave," said Benedict sadly. "I will be all alone again. And there won't be any more jam."

"We'll come back to see you," said Raspberry. "And we'll have more jam-sandwich picnics."

"No," said the badger. "You'll be busy growing your berries. You'll forget about me."

"No, we won't!" cried the Kids.

"Wait. I have an idea, Benedict," said Strawberry excitedly. "When spring comes and the ground is soft, why don't you move out of the Deep Dark Wood and come live in Strawberryland? You could dig a new burrow right next to my strawberry patch. Then we could visit you all the time!"

"That's a good idea," said Benedict. "I'll do it."

"Hurray!" said the Kids.

Then they packed up their sled, hugged Benedict, and started on their way.

Benedict stood alone by his tunnel and watched them go. I'll be busy in the spring, he thought, digging a new burrow, eating jam sandwiches every day....

Benedict's pleasant thoughts made him drowsy. "It's time for a nap," he said sleepily. Then he slowly walked back down his tunnel and settled down in his burrow to dream a dream of springtime.

This beautiful book tells how Strawberry Shortcake and her friends find the Snow King's magic crystal and bring sunshine back to their long-frozen world.

If you have enjoyed this enchanting storybook, you'll want to read its companion volume– *The Adventures of Strawberry Shortcake and Her Friends.*

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